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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: REACTION FROM YEREVAN, ARMENIA: ARMENIAN MEDIA
ON THE SITUATION IN AJARIA

¶1. SUMMARY: Armenian mass media widely covered the recent developments in Ajaria and Georgia and paid special attention to the resignation of Ajaria's leader, Aslan Abashidze. The press outlined the importance of the recent political developments for their possible impact on Armenia and on the whole region. The Foreign Ministry of Armenia made a short statement welcoming the peaceful resolution of the conflict. END SUMMARY

STATEMENT BY ARMENIA'S FOREIGN MINISTRY

¶2. The Spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry said: "Official Yerevan expressed satisfaction that the confrontation between Georgian central authorities and the leadership of the Adjaria autonomous region was resolved peacefully and without bloodshed. Such a resolution was another important step on the path to establishing peace and stability in Georgia, and therefore in the whole South Caucasus. In this regard, we welcome the Georgian authorities' consistent and resolute policy which helped overcome this obstacle."

REACTIONS IN THE MEDIA

SWAN SONG OF THE AJARIAN LION

¶3. Government official Armenian language daily HAYASTANI HANRAPETUTIUN (05/07) tries to explain the recent events in Ajaria as the result of superpower interests in the region. "The recent events in Ajaria obviously demonstrated the interests that superpowers have in the region and showed the new allocation of power in the South Caucasus. We can definitely see that the superpowers are paying more attention to the economic factor rather than to the military in protecting their political interests, i.e. they push forward their economic interests, by means of which they are trying to dictate their rules of the game. The recent turmoil around Ajaria can be explained by the economic interests of superpowers. European structures, as well as Moscow and Washington, were actively involved in the resolution of the conflict. In the current situation there might be a question as to why these superpowers are so interested in the developments in this small autonomous region. Ajaria's only treasure, and at the same time misfortune, is the port of Batumi, which served as the cause of a serious struggle." "After Abashidze's resignation Sahakashvili stated that Georgia's reunification has started. However, it should be noted that as opposed to Ajaria, there are many ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the resolution of which would be rather difficult for official Tbilisi. Coming back to the developments in Ajaria, it should be mentioned that the peaceful resolution of the crisis directly affects Armenia's interests. For Armenia, the thing of utmost importance is the reopening of Ajaria's railroad, which now will become a priority in the agenda of official Tbilisi."

THE SUNSET OF THE ABSHIDZE FAMILY

¶4. Centrist Armenian language daily AZG (05/07) outlined the role of Russia in the settlement of the conflict and future plans of Sahakashvili. "As of May 6 the 'tsar' of Ajaria is Sahakashvili. Igor Ivanov, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, arrived in Batumi at night and took Abashidze and his family members to Moscow with him. What happened in Tbilisi on November 22, 2003 was repeated in Batumi. Both Shevardnadze and Aslan Abashidze left the political arena under the pressure of the people without any blood and fire. In both cases the mediator was the emissary of the Kremlin, Igor Ivanov, who is Georgian on his mother's side. In a recent interview given to Azg, Sahakashvili said that, as during the days of the rose revolution Ivanov came to rescue Shevardnadze, on the 6th of May he came to Batumi at the invitation of Sahakashvili to rescue Abashidze and prevent war between Georgia and Ajaria. Sahakashvili promised the

people of Batumi that Ajaria is the beginning of the reconsolidation [of Georgia]; next it will be Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's turn. However, today does not seem to be the time for settling the Abkhazian conflict. First of all the Georgian authorities should establish order in Ajaria, by distributing posts previously occupied by members of the Abashidze family clan among Sahakashvili's supporters."

LION'S SONG

15. Oppositionist Armenian daily ARAVOT (05/07) wrote: "After the first unsuccessful collision between newly-elected Mikhail Sahakashvili and Ajarian feudal lord Abashidze, Russian media was filled with derisive and sometimes mocking publications. In those publications Sahakashvili was presented as a failed and hot-tempered young man who was feverishly trying to dethrone the 'experienced' and 'serious' figure. Some Armenian mass media as well put forth all possible efforts to mock the newly elected Sahakashvili, who came to power on a wave of public emotion and who had the open support of the West. But recently the irony has abruptly lessened. Maybe people here have started to understand that it is indecent to defend the local lord, who opposes all the existing laws and the constitution of the country, who is fully corrupted and who thinks only about the self-interest of his clan, and from the other side to mock somebody who is the favorite of the people. Following Abashidze's loss of Moscow's support, the Ajarians, who are almost the same as Georgians, didn't resist even one hour during the second collision with Sahakashvili. Again the people won in Georgia and that victory is more than precious as it fully reflects the idea of legitimacy of the authorities [i.e., elected to power by the will of the people]."

ASLAN HAS ESCAPED

16. Oppositionist Armenian daily HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK (05/07) expressed admiration for the Georgian President and thinly veiled disappointment with the current leader of Armenia. "Georgian President Mikhail Sahakashvili once again won the day's major political battle and achieved Abashidze's resignation and escape from Georgia. Especially after the escape of the Ajarian 'Lion,' political analysts began to take more seriously the promise by Sahakashvili to restore regional integrity. Yes, Sahakashvili won the principal battle. But it happened not because the Georgian president is a warrior or the only man in Georgia. It happened because the Georgian people believe in their leader, it happened because the Georgian people and authorities are a single entity and the authorities arose from the people. And all the Georgian people, the whole nation of Georgia won. It goes without saying that Abashidze's resignation is not considered an intra-Georgian event only. The already-existing great international authority [influence, reputation] of Sahakashvili will grow, and it is evident that he will start to be accepted as a leader of the South Caucasus by the international community and his opinion will be of great importance in dealing with South Caucasus issues. Of course we should be glad for the success of our neighbors but we should not forget about our problems. But in this case Armenia faces another problem. Robert Kocharian will always remain in the shadow of Sahakashvili. So, Armenia has the task of finding a leader like Mikhail Sahakashvili."

ORDWAY